

on to win Cannes's top prize, while

ent. Both curious (in every sense of the word) young directors working outside

the change he needs. The world is watching.
—Alex Patterson

Amy Taubin
U.V. 10/3/89

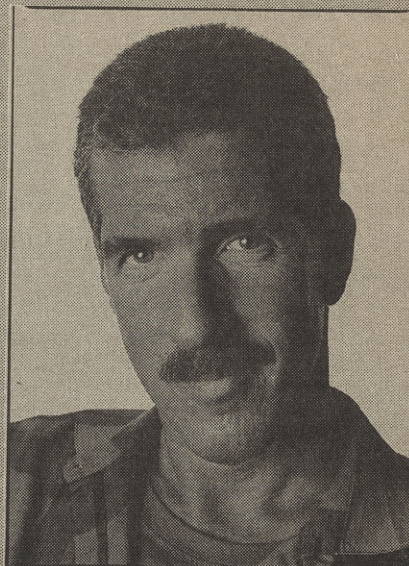
Opening Wide

→ **W**arren Sonbert explains why *Friendly Witness*, playing on the avant-garde program this Sunday at the NYFF, is his first sound film in 20 years.

"Last year, when *Honor and Obey* [an earlier Sonbert film] was in the festival, I loved seeing it on the big screen. The audience gasped and laughed in all the right places, but every time someone coughed, it echoed through the entire hall. It's fine to show silent films in gallery-type screening rooms, but now I'm interested in the more traditional way people go out to the movies. *Friendly Witness* is specifically tailored to the festival. It has a kind of momentum that's like a joyride. The audience should go out feeling exhilarated."

Since 1966, Sonbert has carried his 16mm Bolex everywhere, filming what attracts and/or disturbs him. *Friendly Witness* is composed from outtakes accumulated through his entire career. "The title, like the film itself—like all my films—is double-edged. The words denote something positive, but since the '50s the phrase has been associated with betrayal. I meant it to be provocative."

Set to girl-group golden oldies, the first two sections are flat-out the most dazzling music videos ever made. "The opening is about a certain zeitgeist—kids falling in love. Then the film starts to open up, and the second half [set to classical music] becomes more disturbing than one might have expected. In a sense, this film is Balanchine-inspired. I took several pieces of music in their entirety and built a film around them, much as he



Sonbert: tailoring film to fest

built dances. In my next film I plan to fragment the sound."

JAMES HAMILTON